

2 May 2022

From 'As Needed' To Baseline Duty: Debating the Role of the Canadian Armed Forces in Domestic Emergency Response

NAADSN Graduate Fellow's Opening Comments to the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence

Adam P. MacDonald
NAADSN Research Fellow

This Quick Impact shares the opening statement given by the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN) Graduate Fellow Adam P. MacDonald to the House of Common Standing Committee on National Defence on 02 May 2022. This testimony was part of the committee study entitled 'Rising Domestic Operational Deployments and Challenges for the Canadian Armed Forces'. Adam's remarks specifically address the growing involvement of the Canadian Armed Forces in domestic emergency response, specifically pertaining to natural disasters. The official minutes of this and other sessions, as well as the recordings, are available on the [committee's website](#).

Opening Testimony

Good day Mr. Chair and other member of the Committee. I want to thank-you for inviting me to speak at today's session to share my thoughts regarding the Canadian military's role in domestic emergency response. The last decade has seen a sizeable increase in provincial requests for assistance from the Canadian Armed Forces in dealing with domestic emergencies, specifically, but not only, due to the growing number and severity of climate change induced natural disasters throughout the country. The Canadian Armed Forces has and continues to adapt to this new reality by augmenting its capacity to support these growing requests, such as by establishing a yearly mission, Operation LENTUS, to train and place on standby soldiers to assist as well as growing coordination between Regional Joint Task Force Commands and provincial emergency management organizations. Such efforts serve a long-standing and clear mandate for the military to be prepared to offer such assistance as re-iterated in the current defence policy. However, these increasing requests are transforming this mandate from a 'as needed' to a baseline, regularized duty which combined with competing capability,

operational and structural issues confronting the organization have generated debates about what the role of the Canadian Armed Forces should be in domestic emergency response.

Two main questions lie at the heart of this matter. First, are these requests for support *sustainable* for the military to manage without compromising its other priorities and missions. Second, is the military the *suitable* organization for addressing these challenges, in effect becoming the *de facto* emergency response organization for provinces as part of larger efforts to construct more resilient systems and societies in the face of climate change throughout Canada. With the recently announced national defence review and ongoing development of the National Adaptation Strategy, now is the time to explore this matter as a political issue, not simply a technical, resource and/or organizational one.

It is understandable why the military is increasingly relied upon during these emergencies as it possesses unique organizational, logistic, planning and personnel resources and qualities which no other government body, at any level, does. Operations LASER (the pre-positioning and deploying units to support provincial governments' requests) and VECTOR (assisting the Public Health Agency of Canada secure and distribute vaccines) during the pandemic have showcased the military's unique attributes in these regards. But higher-level political direction and guidance is needed to entrench this mission as a top tier mandate if the status-quo is to continue as it is becoming clear that if the Canadian Armed Forces is to continue to meet these requests for support, they will have to create more capacity and possibly dedicated capabilities to do so.

There are strong reasons to reconsider the growing reliance on the military in domestic emergency response. First, there are competing demands on the military's focus, operational capacity, and resources in terms of adapting to the altering strategic landscape defined by the emergence of rival great powers; numerous large scale procurement renewal plans; building new capabilities in emerging domains such as cyber and space; and reconstitution challenges regarding training, recruitment, retention, and culture change. Second, there are possible civil-military implications of any growing 'ownership' of domestic emergency response by the military if this increasingly becomes a main duty. Third, these developments may disincentivize provincial governments from investing in their own specific emergency services capabilities and lead to growing societal expectations for military assistance in every domestic emergency, thus transforming perceptions of the military's role as a frontline service rather than a force of last resort to be used after civilian agencies have been exhausted or overwhelmed.

If the military, however, is mandated to continue to service, and possibly fully prioritize, these requests and prepare to support the expected growth in demand of these into the future, serious examination of how best to structure and resource the organization so that it can do so sustainably is required. Such an examination should explore four key areas. First, whether a new operational command is required to plan, train, coordinate and oversee the domestic deployment of military assets in these missions. Second, whether existing support capabilities should be expanded beyond not just servicing the needs of the military but towards meeting broader emergency response demands such as health care, logistics and engineering capabilities. Third, whether dedicated units should be constructed which are exclusively trained and deployed for these missions, allowing other elements of the military to focus on different missions and mandates. Finally, whether these units and

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capabilities should be part of the Regular or Reserve force, with particular deliberation on the duties of and extent to which the latter as a volunteer service should be relied upon in this sense.

The question is not whether the Canadian Armed Forces should or should not be involved in domestic emergency response. It has and will always have a role, especially because it possesses unique capabilities such as search and rescue and strategic lift which would be difficult to replicate elsewhere. What is needed, however, is determining the scale and scope of military involvement, its purpose and function, as part of a broader whole of government and indeed whole of society effort to adapt to the disruptive realities of climate change on our economy, infrastructure, and society which will only increase in intensity moving forward. Such a determination requires public deliberation and clear political direction rather than letting mission creep to continue, being uncritically examined.

Thank-you again for inviting me and I look forward to your questions.